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ABSTRACT

This digest presents an overview of accommodations for students of limited English proficiency (LEP) and an overview of inclusion practices on statewide assessments, with emphasis on the accommodation known as linguistic simplification. The inclusion of LEP students in statewide testing programs over the last decade has been uneven. In the mid-1990s, 44 of the 48 states with state assessment programs permitted English language learners (ELLs) to be excused from one or more assessments. A study of state inclusion policies and accommodations for ELLs in the 1998-1999 school year showed that most states were trying various accommodations for ELLs. Appropriate test accommodations level the playing field and help ensure the validity of the test for all students by eliminating irrelevant obstacles. It is important to identify appropriate, valid, and reliable accommodations so that students who receive them do not receive a demonstrable advantage over those who do not. Two recent studies that explored the effects of linguistic simplification as an accommodation illustrate the complexity of the issue. The result of the process of linguistic simplification must be to make the item accessible to ELLs without altering the difficulty of the content. This is not always possible. Further studies are necessary to address the usefulness of linguistic simplification for LEP students taking formal and high stakes assessments. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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Test Accommodations for LEP Students

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It is widely believed that school achievement will improve if education systems identify what is to be learned, then assess student mastery of that material to determine the effectiveness of instruction). In recent years, there has been much discussion about how best to assess the school achievement of students with limited English proficiency (LEP), also known as English language learners (ELLs). Those charged with setting inclusion and accommodation policies for state assessment programs face two problems: the lack of research on the effects of accommodations generally, and the lack of research on how specific accommodations address the linguistic needs of ELLs.

This Digest presents an overview of LEP student accommodation and inclusion practices on statewide assessments, with special emphasis on the accommodation known as linguistic simplification.

LEP Participation Rates in State Assessments

The inclusion of LEP students in statewide testing programs over the last decade has been uneven. In the mid-90s, 44 of the 48 states with state assessment programs in place permitted ELLs to be excused from one or more state assessments. In 27 of the 44 states, ELLs as a group were routinely exempted from participation in the state assessment program (Rivera and Vincent, 1997).

When the federal Elementary Secondary Education Act was reauthorized in 1994 as the Improving America's School Act (IASA), it mandated the annual testing of LEP students in Title I programs and required that states create final assessment systems that are inclusive of all students by the 2001-02 school year. A study of state inclusion and accommodation policies for ELLs in the 1998-99 school year showed states were generally trying out various accommodations for ELLs. However, most states appeared to be using accommodations designed for students with disabilities rather than accommodations designed with the linguistic needs of ELLs in mind (Rivera, Stansfield, Scialdone, and Sharkey, 2000).

Appropriate Accommodations for LEP Students on State Assessments

Appropriate test accommodations level the playing field and help ensure the validity of the test for all students by eliminating irrelevant obstacles that affect test performance and test scores. Yet accommodations should not give a demonstrable advantage to students who receive them over students who do not. Some accommodations for LEP students are:

1. Offering extra time,
2. Providing bilingual dictionaries and glossaries, and
3. Allowing the teacher to clarify the meaning of words on the test (when they do not relate to the content being tested).

Some accommodations can be problematic. A glossary plus extra time was found to raise performance for both LEP and non-LEP students, which raises concerns about validity (Abedi, Lord, Hofstetter, & Baker, 2000). Access to English dictionaries or native language dictionaries can unfairly advantage LEP students by giving them access to content-related terms. A customized dictionary that does not contain words that assist students with test content appears to be a promising accommodation (Abedi, 2001).

Some accommodations address environmental conditions that help students feel more comfortable, such as allowing the student to take the test in a familiar setting with a familiar teacher with other students receiving similar accommodations, or permitting a flexible schedule that includes shorter test sessions or more breaks. Administrative accommodations can include allowing the teacher to read directions aloud, repeating directions, and simplifying or clarifying directions (Rivera & Stansfield, 1998).

Several professional groups within the education and measurement communities have issued recent calls for research to identify appropriate, valid, and reliable accommodations for ELLs, including the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education (1999), the American Educational Research Association (2000), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (2000), and the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2000). Although research on accommodations for ELLs has begun to be reported on at conferences and to appear in the literature, studies involving accommodations seldom involve an experimental research design, making it difficult to determine the effects of accommodations on reliability, validity, and score comparability.

Measuring the Effects of Linguistic Simplification

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When evaluating the efficiency of an accommodation, there are two issues to be determined. First, among those for whom it is not considered necessary, there is a need to understand whether the accommodation provides an unfair advantage to an examinee who receives it over one who does not. For example, would an English-speaking student who took a test in which the language had been simplified to aid comprehension get an improved score? Second, if among the first group, there is no advantage for those who receive it, then there is a need to understand whether the accommodation actually improves the performance of those who have special needs, for example, the English language learner. Would an LEP student demonstrate improved performance on a test that had been linguistically simplified over a test with standard wording?

One way to determine if an accommodation offers an unfair advantage, or whether it meaningfully assists students with special needs, is through an experimental design whereby students with and without the necessary condition are randomly assigned to treatments, with some students receiving the treatment and others not getting it. Two recent experimental studies that have explored the effects of linguistic simplification as an accommodation illustrate the

complexity of the issue. One study (Abedi, Lord, & Hofstetter, 1998) involved mathematics items used in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In the study, test booklets containing either a Spanish version, a simplified English version, or original NAEP math items (in unsimplified English) were randomly administered to 1,400 LEP and non-LEP eighth-graders in southern California middle schools. Only Hispanic students received the Spanish version. The simplified items were rewritten by content experts in linguistics and mathematics at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing. The analyses indicated that both LEP and non-LEP students (that is, fully English proficient students) performed best on the simplified version, and worst on the Spanish version. While LEP and non-LEP students performed significantly better on the simplified items, significant differences in item difficulty were obtained on only 34 percent of the simplified items, leading the researcher to suggest that linguistic clarification of math items might be beneficial to all students. He also noted that other factors, such as length of time in the United States, English proficiency, reading competency, and prior math instruction had significant effects on scores.

Rivera and Stansfield (2001) examined the effects of linguistic simplification on fourth- and sixth-grade science test items used in the Delaware Student Testing Program. At each grade level, four parallel 10-item testlets were included on an operational statewide assessment. Items differed only in that on one testlet, they were linguistically simplified by experts at The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education, while on the other, the standard wording was used. A total of 11,306 non-LEP students and 109 LEP students took one of the eight forms of the test. Because the number of LEP students was split among the eight forms, the number of LEP students taking each test form was small, ranging from 6 to 23 students. While the researchers caution that due to the limited sample size, nothing can be generalized about linguistic simplification as an aid to LEP students, the findings for the large non-LEP sample are quite clear. The linguistic simplification was not helpful to non-LEP students who received it. This provides evidence that linguistic simplification is not a threat to score comparability.

The result of the process of linguistic simplification must be to make the item accessible to ELLs without altering the difficulty of the content. However, at times, language and content interact, and in these cases, it is not possible to linguistically simplify items without simplifying the content. Further studies are necessary to address the usefulness of linguistic simplification for LEP students taking formal and high-stakes assessments. If experimental studies involving large samples of LEP students who are randomly assigned to treatments show that those LEP students who receive simplified items perform statistically and meaningfully better than those who receive the regular, unsimplified version of such items, then the utility of linguistic simplification in meeting the needs of LEP test-takers will be established. At the moment, the research shows that when properly carried out, linguistic simplification need not be considered a threat to score comparability.

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